

## E-learning and Concurrent Alignment: An Essential Bond

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Horizontal Alignment

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Vertical Alignment

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Concurrent Alignment

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Considerable research has been devoted to the value of and necessity for alignment within an organization—enough so that there is no need to make a case for why one should pursue alignment. Alignment is essentially the strategic link between the staff, customers, business processes, business strategies, and leadership (Labovitz and Rosansky, 1997).

E-learning initiatives require a serious analysis of alignment before they are pursued and integrated into the organization. This is because in the new knowledge era, a time where reliance is on the ability to regenerate knowledge for product or service improvement, e-learning becomes a viable means to sustain the competitive advantage—but only if properly aligned. Additionally, e-learning effectiveness requires decentralizing responsibility (to include self-responsibility) and in traditional hierarchical organizations, if not properly aligned, roles can be confusing and not working in concert with one another to achieve the strategic objective. The net result is multiple interpretations of expectations and chaos results since senior management has empowered a body to institute e-learning but e-learning requires concurrent alignment.

So, how does one make sure their e-learning initiative is properly aligned to prevent the aforementioned issues from occurring? This proves to be a very interesting question. If embracement of technology to further organizational objectives is considered an essential element to the success of your organization and within that staff development resonates, then e-learning should be a strategic strategy for you. If this is the case, then the foundation needs to be constructed for alignment to maximize the objective.

The essence of alignment starts with the strategic planning process. Inserting e-learning to support strategic objectives portrays the knowledge **commitment** of the organization. The secondary steps focus on what is required to ensure e-learning success and aligning processes within the organization to support the strategic objective—if not a stand-alone objective. It is at this point that we move along a continuum to allow e-learning to materialize (a deployment plan). Alignment is required both vertically and horizontally (thus concurrent alignment) for e-learning to be effective. For

clarification, vertical alignment is where the most senior member and most junior member of the organization (and everyone in-between) are working in concert towards a common objective. Horizontal alignment on the other hand is a means to make sure the customer's issues and desires become drivers of the organizations actions. Concurrent alignment is a balance between vertical and horizontal alignment.

**Vertical alignment.** Placing e-learning in the strategic plan plants the seed to express an important **strategy** for the organization. To get the organization (in total) to accept e-learning requires deeper emphasis and a **commitment** to integrating the initiative throughout the organization. The following is suggested as a potential means of achieving vertical alignment. Note that the information provided below can be utilized for both complete revision of the strategic plan and also slight modifications.<sup>1</sup> It is also important to note that as the following steps are conducted, the results will have utility in both vertical and horizontal assessments:

- The senior **leadership** must conduct an organizational review/**assessment** of the mission (to ensure e-learning compliments the strategic objective(s)). At this point, e-learning may not be mentioned specifically but there may be a realization that e-learning can help facilitate several objectives already stated and therefore can be inserted as a “vehicle” to further one or more of the current objectives or be its own objective.
- Develop a goal statement that speaks to e-learning in a broad sense.
- Create objectives and action items to ensure specific responsibilities are assigned with measurable results provided.

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<sup>1</sup> Many strategic planning models exist. The model presented here was developed by Alan M. Zuckerman and conceptually utilized as a boilerplate for e-learning integration to assist with vertical alignment.

The LESCAM  
recipe for  
alignment

Leadership

Empowerment

Strategy

Commitment

Assessment

Measurement

- Identify the timelines, priorities, and resources required to facilitate the goals and objectives.
- Measure the results. Labovitz and Rosansky (1997) correctly state that **measurement** is the key to vertical alignment. Measurement in this context is how an employee or group of employees achieves the objectives and action items defined above.
- Reward the behavior you want to continue. This means through measurement one can discern if there is an area that is not performing to expectations to achieve the objectives established. The continuous measurement and adjusting ensures vertical alignment. The individuals/team must be **empowered** to achieve the action items and also provide feedback on barriers to success. Also, team awards should be considered.

**Horizontal Alignment.** Since vertical alignment is for the internal customer and ensuring the employees are moving in the established direction (in this scenario to support e-learning), horizontal alignment is for the external customer and how well the organization is supporting the external customer's requirements. In that, the need exists to state how well e-learning can provide the greatest "value added" contribution to the external customer. As you go through the horizontal alignment exercise, the part that will assist you greatly is to conduct an internal and external assessment of market structure, dynamics and distinctive characteristics of the business (there are many tools available to help with this process and the details are beyond the scope of this article). The information gathered from the assessments will tell you the organizational structure that is required to be the most responsive to the customers needs and also how e-learning can play an important part in education of those needs. To assist with the horizontal alignment, Labovitz and Rosansky (1997) provide five questions that you need to know about your customers. They include:

- (i) What do our customers care most about?
- (ii) What opportunities exist to best please our customers?
- (iii) How well are we satisfying our customers in relation to what they consider important?
- (iv) What are the highly respected companies doing to please their customers?
- (v) What barriers exist today that precludes us from being the most effective to do business with?

After the five questions are answered, ask how e-learning can facilitate the improvement of the outcome/answer. That answer becomes the beacon to horizontally align e-learning.

**Concurrent Alignment.** E-learning, if part of a strategic objective, should be used to support both the internal and external customers—to draw from and maximize the knowledge that exists within those two bodies. That knowledge then becomes transferable and improved upon. This requires simultaneous vertical and horizontal alignment or concurrent alignment. Concurrent alignment for e-learning happens when the internal processes necessary to support e-learning are focused toward the needs of the customers (internal as well as external). Doing so ensures organizational focus and perhaps greater than any other benefit ensures that e-learning is targeted to the intended audiences to achieve the maximum benefit with the least amount of resources. That is a goal that everyone can embrace!

#### References

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